

Special Delivery

The remit of the Senco has developed considerably over the past few years – **Sal Mckeown** has been researching the latest advice for those taking on this essential and exciting role...

The Special Needs Coordinator or Senco has one of the most strategically important roles in a school. About 20% of the school population in England has some form of special needs so Sencos play an important part in the life of 1.7 million children.

Until the Education and Inspections Act 2006, there was no legal requirement for schools to have a Senco, or even for the post holder to be a trained teacher. These days new Sencos have to undertake the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination, which is offered by 25 different providers in England.

The National Award covers the context of inclusive education, developing strategy and policies, development, planning and application of inclusive practice and collaboration and leadership. The award is worth 60 credits at Masters level.

Whereas in the past a Senco often nurtured small groups of children who were not making satisfactory progress, these days they are more likely to lead a team and influence policy right across the school.

Typical of the new style Senco is Suzy Mattock, who works at Netherhall Learning Campus High School in Huddersfield. "We have students from age zero to nineteen," she explains. "In each school, we've got an SEN manager who does the day-to-day running of the SEN provision and we work as a team. I am the Senco for the learning campus so I manage the provision across the whole site."

A Senco must have a good knowledge of legislation to keep the school safe from costly and time consuming legal challenges. Suzy Mattock believes that the National Award training course is the best way to find out how to keep pace with these increasingly heavy demands. She did her course with Real Training and feels it gave her the information she needed to help her with decision making. "Special needs is such a vast system and quite complicated as it is tied up with legislation and statutory guidelines. Prior to the course, I was doing things and thinking, 'God, I hope I'm doing this right.'" Suzy is now confident that she can meet the requirements and get the best provision for learners. "The students feel comfortable and parents are confident that we're doing the right thing as well," she confirms.

Effective Sencos need to identify needs and have the all important paperwork in place. They need to have at their fingertips all the information for the children in their charge, assessments, identified needs, strategies and evidence of support and outcomes. They need data to measure the effectiveness of different interventions. It's no wonder that many new Sencos feel overwhelmed and under-prepared for their responsibilities – so here are some hints and tips from experts:

Siobhan Mellor, a director of Real Training and Module Leader for the National Award, advises Sencos to check on reporting mechanisms. They must clarify statutory responsibilities to be met and the timescales for processes such as Annual Reviews, tribunals, requests for documents from the Local Authority. Flag up deadlines early to avoid last minute panics and incomplete information.



Checklist: the essential questions

WHO? FIND OUT WHICH THE CHILDREN YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR. MAKE A LIST OF KEY CONTACTS IN OTHER AGENCIES

WHAT? IDENTIFY THE SUPPORT STUDENTS ARE CURRENTLY RECEIVING

WHERE? INFORMATION MIGHT BE HELD IN FILING CABINETS, FOLDERS ON THE SERVER, AS PART OF AN INFORMATION MANAGEMENT PACKAGE.

WHEN? CHECK DEADLINES FOR ANNUAL REVIEWS AND OTHER KEY PAPERWORK

WHY? MAKE SURE YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT DATA IS NEEDED BY SMT, BY CHILD PROTECTION, OFSTED ETC

Look at what the school is currently offering for all children who are under-achieving and not just those with a special needs label. Talk to colleagues and decide what the school should offer and what it could offer and evaluate provision regularly. Decide if an individual child needs one to one support or if his needs can be met in another way. Taylor, for example, is a year 8 pupil with dyscalculia. He has been receiving 20 minutes of one to one support three times a week from a Teaching Assistant (TA) before school. Ask the TA and Taylor's maths teacher what progress Taylor has made in the last six months. Is there evidence of improvement and is this the best or only type of support Taylor can have? Think about ways to increase his independence. Perhaps there is a suitable software package he could use, which would give instant feedback or maybe he could join a lunch time group for pupils from different years working on strategies build skills and confidence in number work.

Dr Linda Evans has been a teacher, a SENCO, an adviser and inspector and is now involved in initial teacher training. She maintains that the Senco's relationship with parents has a major impact on the success of interventions at school and that the first meeting with parents can be crucial. She



suggests inviting them to bring a friend or another family member to meetings and to make sure they get a chance to talk to members of staff and contribute to the planning of any special provision or intervention.

Above all, she advises Sencos to make regular contact throughout the year and not just a quick chat on parents' evening. "Regular updates are important," she advises. "Use the telephone or send a text, a handwritten note or email to keep in touch. Make sure you feed back the positives as well as any concerns you have."

Sometimes parents can be very resistant to changes to provision and suspect that decisions are made for cost cutting reasons. You need to be clear about alternative provisions and show how it marks a progression.

Networking is another skill newly appointed Sencos will need to acquire. They have to liaise with different organisations, with health professionals, social workers and educational psychologists among others. They also have to provide guidance to staff in school and collect information from them too so it must be a two-way process.

Jane Friswell is Educational Development Officer at nasen, the professional organisation for Sencos. She finds that Sencos get good results from their colleagues by identifying



ABOUT THE EXPERT...

SAL MCKEOWN IS A FREELANCE SPECIAL NEEDS JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR OF *BRILLIANT IDEAS FOR USING ICT IN THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM* (ROUTLEDGE) AND A BOOK FOR PARENTS, *HOW TO HELP YOUR DYSLEXIC AND DYSPRAXIC CHILD* (CRIMSON PUBLISHING)

what is important to them and adopting their methods of working. "For maths staff I talk about data and measuring trends," she observes. "With English we look at case studies. You have to adapt your approach."

Look at the professional development opportunities for staff. These must be practical and relevant. Although Sencos may find low incidence disabilities fascinating, a teacher of D&T needs to know, say, about practical ways of involving Melanie, a pupil with restricted vision, in practical work. Think about how staff will access the information. Magazines and leaflets tend to go astray so maybe it would be better to have a dedicated area on the school intranet with scans of articles and web links all key worded for curriculum and key stage relevance. Perhaps finding and posting suitable information should become the responsibility of a learning support assistant (LSA) rather than a joint task for the whole special needs team where there is a chance that nobody will see it as a priority.

"A good Senco has to be able to think outside the box," says Jane Friswell. This is where a new Senco can really make a mark. Sometimes provision becomes stale or even moribund. Visit other schools if you can or join some of the online forums to see what others are doing. Be bold and pilot different approaches.

If you run an initiative for a short period of time with small groups of children it gives you a chance to review progress. "The hardest thing when you're doing this job," comments Suzy Mattock, "is that you don't really stop and think what impact this is having. But allowing yourself the time to take stock, to think about what your next moves are and plan what you're going to do, that helps you to think about what you do as a school and how to move the provision forward."

If you only do 3 things...

- 1 Join nasen: wnasen.org.uk
- 2 Grab a training place: education.gov.uk/schools/careers/traininganddevelopment/b00201451/sen-skills/advanced-skills
- 3 Find a forum. Join SENCO forum at <http://lists.education.gov.uk/mailman/listinfo/senco-forum> or have a look for a Twitter group